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ABSTRACT

Results are presented of a nationwide telephone survey of 1,200 adults --conducted from November 1984 to January 1985--that examined the public's response to secondary school reform. The public wants greater student accountability, greater teacher initiative and accountability, and upgraded curricula. Ninety-five percent of the respondents supported high school graduation exams and junior high promotion tests. Participants also wanted tangible evidence of teacher competence and initiative. More than 80 percent favored national teacher exams and teachers working during the summer to improve their teaching. About two-thirds were ready to support measures designed to attract and retain good teachers, including increasing teachers' salaries and/or offering merit pay to outstanding teachers. Respondents were opposed to school closings and cutbacks in extracurricular activities as ways to pay for these reforms; most preferred paying higher taxes instead. About one-third of the survey's participants said they would abandon support for more rigorous course work if their children had to give up athletics or other extracurricular activities to have time enough for schoolwork. (Author/JD)

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a nationwide telephone survey of 1,200 adults--conducted from November 1984 to January 1985 and sponsored by the National Institute of Education--that examined the public's response to secondary school reform. The results portray a groundswell of public support for the reform movement. The public wants greater student accountability, greater teacher initiative and accountability, and upgraded curricula.

Despite the diversity of the American public, 95% of the survey's respondents voiced their support for high-school graduation exams and junior-high promotion tests. In fact, most survey participants found the concept of student competency testing so compelling that they said they would be willing to have the exams even if their own children suffered the consequences of failure.

Survey participants also declared that they wanted tangible evidence of teacher competence and initiative. More than 80% said they favored national teacher exams and teachers working during the summer to improve their teaching. In addition, about two-thirds were also ready to support measures designed to attract and retain good teachers, including increasing teachers' salaries to an average of $25,000 per year and/or offering merit pay to outstanding teachers. Respondents were opposed to school closings and cutbacks in extracurricular activities as ways to pay for these reforms; most preferred paying $200 in increased taxes instead.

The basic academic curriculum outlined by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in *A Nation at Risk* has also struck a responsive chord among the public; but about one-third of the survey's participants said they would abandon support for more rigorous course work if their children had to give up athletics or other extracurricular activities to have enough time for schoolwork.

PUBLIC RESPONSE TO PROPOSALS FOR RAISING ACADEMIC STANDARDS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS[1]

Donald J. Freeman, Philip A. Cusick, and Richard T. Houang[2]

This paper reports the results of a national telephone survey, examining the attitudes of Americans toward public high schools. Its purposes were (a) to assess public response to efforts to improve academic standards in secondary schools and (b) to determine the public's willingness to bear the costs of standards-raising efforts. While attempts to raise academic standards seem to have strong public support, there is uncertainty as to the depth of that support across various subgroups and equal uncertainty as to the depth of that support for particular standards-raising proposals. There is also uncertainty as to the public's willingness to bear the cost of reform efforts.

Attempts to improve academic standards entail certain costs. If secondary schools put more time and energy into academics, less of both will be available for other educational goals. If students are asked to increase the time and effort expended in academic endeavors, they will have less time for other activities such as athletics or part-time jobs. Many of the reform proposals, such as calls for increased teacher salaries, have simple and direct financial costs; other proposals have social or personal costs. If

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[1]This study was sponsored by the National Institute of Education, Department of Education, Washington, D.C. from November 1984 to January 1985. (Contract No. 400-83-0052)

[2]Donald J. Freeman is a senior researcher with the High School Standards Project and is a member of the Content Determinants Project. He is also a professor of teacher education at Michigan State University. Philip A. Cusick is coordinator of the High School Standards Project and is a professor of administration and higher education and chairperson of the educational administration department at MSU. Richart T. Houang, a research associate with the High School Standards Project, is a systems analyst with MSU's Computer Center.

junior-high school promotion tests, high-school graduation exams, or more demanding course requirements are implemented, certain students will have to bear the pejorative judgments emanating from more stringent standards. If those pejorative judgments are more heavily weighed against certain subgroups such as poor and minority students, those actions may be regarded as reversing the schools' egalitarian efforts and hence may be construed as a social cost. If the pejorative judgments accompanying more stringent requirements are lodged against one's own child, that can be regarded as a personal cost.

Following this line of reasoning, the authors studied the standards-raising movement and its background, identified the major reform proposals and their probable costs, and developed an interview schedule to assess the depth of public support and willingness to pay for standards-raising initiatives.

Research Procedure

Sample

The 1,200 adults who participated in the telephone survey represented 59% of the 2,047 households in the designated sample. To identify designated households for the sample, the authors considered both published and unpublished telephone numbers and attempted to reflect the proportion of residential households in each of the nine census regions in the continental United States. A description of the sampling plan is provided in Freeman, Cusick, and Houang (1985).

Table 1 describes sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and recent population estimates provided by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1983 & 1984). Overall, these data indicate that the sample was most representative of U.S. estimates for geographical regions. It was least accurate in its representation of levels of formal education and of households with family

Table 1

Sample Characteristics (in percents)

	Sample	U.S.
1. Geographical regions		
East	21.2	22.0
Midwest	28.9	25.4
South	31.7	33.7
West	18.2	18.9
2. Gender		
females	57.9	52.4
males	42.1	47.6
3. Age of respondent		
18 to 29	29.5	30.1
30 to 49	38.2	34.2
50 and older	31.2	35.7
undesignated	1.2	----
4. Ethnic groups		
white	81.1	83.4
black	11.2	11.8
other ethnic groups	6.2	4.9
undesignated	1.5	----
5. Respondent's level of education		
college graduate	27.2	17.7
some college	25.5	15.3
high school graduate	34.4	37.9
some high school	8.1	13.3
no high school	4.4	15.8
undetermined	0.3	----
6. Family income levels		
over $50,000	10.5	10.9
$30,000 to $50,000	23.3	24.9
$20,000 to $30,000	25.7	23.0
$10,000 to $20,000	21.2	24.6
under $10,000	10.7	16.6
undesignated	8.5	----
7. Children in public high schools (see notes)		
public high school parents	39.8	NA
private/parochial high school parents	3.7	NA
no children in high school	26.2	NA
no children	30.4	NA

Note. Public high school parents = parents whose children are currently enrolled or have already graduated from high school. U.S. percentages are based on 1982 estimates provided in two publications of the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1983 & 1984). NA = not available

incomes of less than $10,000. Situations in which the responses of subpopulations that were over- or underrepresented in the sample differed from those of related subgroups are noted in the text. These differences should be considered in the interpretation of population estimates.

Time of the Interviews

The median length of the 1,200 interviews was about 20 minutes. Each was conducted by a specially trained, professional interviewer from Market Opinion Research between late November 1984 and early January 1985.

Statistical Analyses

Chi-square tests of independence were used to determine if significant differences existed in responses across population subgroups. Because so many tests of this type were conducted, the probability of a Type I error was fixed at .01 across all analyses. The target population for this study includes all adults, 18 years or older, who reside in the continental United States. In interpreting the results, it is important to allow for sampling errors of plus or minus 3% for the entire sample and an even larger range for subpopulations. It is also important to recognize that the study does not provide reliable estimates for local communities.

Summary of Preliminary Findings

Public Reaction to Secondary Schools Goals

The first section of the survey was based on Goodlad's (1983) analysis of the general goals of schooling. It assessed public reaction to five major goals of public high schools--to teach job-related skills, academic subjects, daily living, personal growth, and social growth. Respondents with children who have attended high school were asked whether they considered it very

important, somewhat important, or not important for their children to learn what is taught in each of these areas. For those without high school-aged children, the question was phrased hypothetically, "Imagine you have children who are in high school. . . ." Because the responses of the two groups were similar, the data were combined and are summarized in Table 2.

In identifying experiences that are very important for their children (Column 1), participants indicated strong support for the academic goals of schools, with a slightly lower level of concern for those dealing with personal and social growth. When choosing the most important experience for their children (Column 2), courses focusing on job-related skills ranked second, but far below, courses in academic subjects. Overall, it can be concluded that most American adults have a strong commitment to academic goals, but may resist reforms that erode the attention given to the other major goals of schooling.

Response to Standards-Raising Proposals

Job-related skills, personal growth, and social development are not the targets of the standards-raising movement. Its major emphasis is to increase the schools' commitment to, and the students' involvement and effort in, academic pursuits. To gain a clearer sense of the public's support for that effort, the questions posed to survey participants asked them to think in terms of "things your local high school might do to improve its success in teaching academic subjects." The data in Table 3 summarize public reactions to the 14 standards-raising proposals presented in the interview.

The figures in Column 1 describe the percent of respondents who favored each proposal. Accounting for sampling errors, the proportion of the public favoring each recommendation should fall within plus and minus three

Table 2

Public Perceptions of Basic Goals for Secondary Schools

Courses/Experiences	Percent of respondents who believe: It is very important for their children to learn what is taught in these courses/experiences	Percent of respondents who believe: This type of experience is more important than the other four choices for their children
Courses that deal with job-related skills (e.g., welding, auto repair, shorthand, and bookkeeping)	47.9	13.7
Academic subjects (e.g., math, science, English and social studies)	92.2	37.0
Courses that focus on daily living (e.g., home management, cooking, and consumer math)	46.6	6.3
Teachers should encourage personal growth (i.e., try to build self-understanding, creativity, and self-confidence)	81.7	9.9
Teachers should encourage social growth (i.e., try to teach students how to get along with others, to accept social responsibilities, and to appreciate their own and other cultures)	78.3	8.6
No clear preference	----	24.5

Table 3

Level of Public Support for Standards-Raising Initiatives

Should your local high school take this action?	% yes	% no	% no opinion	% who prefer this action to 11 other choices	Significant sociodemographic differences in response patterns[a]
Require students to pass high-school graduation exams in reading and math	95.1	4.3	0.7	35.5	
Require students to pass junior-high promotion exams in reading and math	95.2	4.0	0.8	13.5	4
a. At least two-thirds of the classes students take should be required courses	82.5	12.6	4.8	NC	5
b. At least one-half of all classes should be required courses	91.5	2.6	5.9	5.2	5
Limit the size of all academic classes to 25 or fewer students	85.5	10.9	3.6	6.4	2, 7
Design system of rewards and penalties to reduce unexcused absences from school	84.9	10.6	4.4	NC	
Require teachers to pass state or national teacher exams	83.9	10.5	5.6	NC	4,5
Have teachers spend one month each summer doing things to improve their teaching	80.9	15.3	3.8	7.2	3, 5
Increase the average salary for teachers to at least $25,000	73.8	19.6	6.6	3.8	1, 3,4,5
Assign at least 1 1/2 hours of homework every day	71.0	26.8	2.3	3.5	3,4,5
Pay outstanding teachers higher salaries than other teachers with the same seniority (merit increases)	66.6	26.4	7.0	3.3	3,4,5,6,7
Students who disrupt class activities day after day should					
a. remain in regular classrooms	15.9	77.2	6.9	NC	3, 6
b. be assigned to alternative classrooms	64.7	25.9	9.4	2.4	6
c. be expelled from school	10.0	80.6	9.4	NC	2
Increase the length of the school day by one hour	45.8	50.8	3.4	0.6	2
Almost all required courses should focus on academic subjects	42.3	52.8	4.8	2.3	
Increase the length of the school year by one month	24.9	69.2	5.9	0.5	1, 3, 7
No preference	----	----	---	15.8	

Note. NC = not considered (i.e., was not included in the set of choices).

[a] 1 = geographical regions; 2 = gender; 3 = age of respondent; 4 = ethnic groups; 5 = respondent's level of education; 6 = family income levels; 7 = those with and without children in public high schools

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percentage points of these figures. Survey participants also responded to a series of forced-choice questions involving 12 of the 14 proposals. The percent who picked a given initiative as their top choice among the 12 alternatives is shown in Column 4.

As these figures indicate, there was a very strong level of support for graduation and promotion tests. When asked whether their local high school should have high-school graduation exams or junior-high promotion tests, 95% said "yes" (Column 1). In the sequence of forced-choice questions that followed, about one-half of all survey participants named one of these two exams as the action they were most eager for their local high school to take (Column 4). As shown in Column 5, "significant sociodemographic differences," the level of enthusiasm for these two measures was consistent across all but one of the subgroups considered in the study (as listed in Table 1). A somewhat higher proportion of whites (96%) than blacks and other minorities (91%) was in favor of junior-high school promotion exams.

More than 80% of the respondents were also in favor of (a) increasing the proportion of required courses, (b) limiting class size, (c) reducing student absenteeism, (d) testing teachers, and (e) having teachers spend one month each summer upgrading their knowledge or skills. The level of support for these five measures was usually consistent across subgroups. Nevertheless, among the "level of education" subgroups, college graduates were most likely to agree that at least two-thirds of all classes should be required courses (90% favored). Those most likely to favor limiting class size were females (88%) and parents who did not have children in high school (92%). College graduates (76%) and blacks and other minorities (76%) were least likely to support national teacher exams. Those 50 years or older (71%), college

graduates (76%), and those who did not attend high school (76%) were least in favor of teachers upgrading their skills during the summer.

Four proposals were supported by about two-thirds of the respondents: (a) increasing teachers' salaries, (b) assigning 1 1/2 hours of homework each day, (c) paying merit increases to outstanding teachers, and (d) assigning disruptive students to alternative classrooms. Across the full set of 14 questions, subgroups differed most often in their level of support for proposals calling for increases in teachers' salaries or merit pay. Support for increased salaries was highest among those living in the West (80%), those less than 50 years of age (77%), blacks and other minorities (82%), and college graduates (82%); it was lowest among those living in the Midwest (70%) and for individuals who did not attend high school (62%).

Support for merit pay was highest among those with family incomes above $50,000 per year (77%), high-school parents (72%), and those who attended college (72%). It was lowest among blacks (53%) and those less than 30 years of age (58%). As these data indicate, blacks and those under 30 years old preferred increasing teachers' salaries to offering merit pay. Blacks and other minorities were most in favor, and high-school graduates least in favor, of assigning 1 1/2 hours of homework each day (74% vs. 62%).

Only three proposals were not supported by a majority of respondents: (a) lengthening the school day by one hour, (b) having almost all required courses focus on academics, and (c) lengthening the school year by one month. Males were the only subgroup somewhat in favor of lengthening the school day (51%); none of the subgroups advocated limiting the focus of all required courses to academics or lengthening the school year.

Comparison with Gallup Poll

Some questions on this standards survey overlapped with those raised in the annual Gallup poll on education sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa (Gallup, 1984). There were striking similarities and differences in responses to these questions. For example, 65% of the respondents in the Gallup poll and 67% of the participants in this survey favored merit pay for teachers. Likewise, 42% of the participants in the Gallup poll and 46% of the standards survey respondents favored lengthening the school day by one hour. In contrast, the proportion of Gallup poll respondents who favored lengthening the school year by one month was far greater than the corresponding figure for standards survey respondents (44% vs. 25%).

Teacher testing. Despite a difference in wording, the proportion of Gallup poll respondents favoring teachers being tested "to prove [their] knowledge in the subjects they will teach" was only slightly higher than the percentage of participants in this survey who said their local school district should "hire only those teachers who have passed state or national teacher exams" (89% vs. 84%). Likewise, the proportion of Gallup poll participants who felt that high-school students were not required to work hard enough (67%) was very nearly equal to the percentage of standards survey participants who favored assigning at least 1 1/2 hours of homework every day (71%).

Teacher salary increase. However, there were clear differences in results when participants in the Gallup poll were asked, "Do you think salaries in this community for teachers are too high, too low, or just about right?" and individuals in this survey were asked, "Should the average salary for teachers be increased to at least $25,000 a year? Teachers earn about $20,000

a year now." Only 37% of the Gallup respondents said teacher's salaries were too low, but 74% of the participants in this survey said these salaries should be increased.

Nationwide high-school exam. Finally, when participants in the Gallup poll were asked, "Should all high-school students in the United States be required to pass a standard nationwide examination in order to get a high-school diploma?" only 65% said "yes," whereas 95% of the respondents in the standards survey agreed that "students [should] be required to pass tests in reading and math to graduate from high school."

Public Willingness to Pay the Financial Costs of Reforms

The standards-raising proposals in Table 4 have simple and direct financial costs. To assess the depth of support for these reforms, respondents were asked to choose the one action from this subset they "are most eager for [their] local high school to take." Participants were then asked if they would continue to support their preferred action if they knew their local school board would pay for it (a) by eliminating "athletics, music, and other extracurricular activities," (b) by "closing certain schools, including the elementary school in their neighborhood," or (c) through $200 per year increases in their taxes.

Across all groups, responses were quite definite. Participants said they would be quite willing to pay increased taxes to attain their preferred reforms, but would be quite unwilling to forgo extracurricular activities or to have their local schools closed. Whereas levels of opposition to eliminating extracurricular activities and closing neighborhood schools were consistent across the seven initiatives, willingness to pay increased taxes varied among

proponents of different initiatives (see Chi-square tests on Table 4). Those who chose "assigning disruptive students to alternative classrooms" as their preferred action were least willing to pay increased taxes; those who favored lengthening the school year or increasing teachers' salaries were most willing to pay for preferred reforms in this way (see Column 7 of Table 4). Reports of willingness to pay increased taxes also varied across subgroups. Those most willing to pay increased taxes to attain their preferred reform were males (78%), individuals from 30-49 years of age (79%), those who attended or graduated from college (84%), and those with family incomes of $30,000 or greater (83%).

Public Willingness to Endure Personal/Social Costs for Reforms

Five of the standards-raising proposals have personal or social costs. In assessing the depth of public support for these reforms, respondents were again asked to choose the one action from this subset they were most eager for their local high school to take. Most respondents were then asked to imagine "[they had] a child who has to work very hard to get passing grades in high school." Those whose preferred reform was junior-high school promotion tests were asked to imagine "[they had] a child who has failed [these exams]." This introduction was followed by questions about adverse effects the child might experience if the respondent's preferred proposal were implemented. Table 5 summarizes responses to this set of questions for four of the five proposals: junior-high promotion exams, increase ratio of required courses, 1 1/2 hours of homework, and limit focus of required courses to academics. Table 6 in the next section depicts the personal and social costs respondents said they would be willing to endure for high-school graduation exams.

Table 4

Level of Public Support for Actions Designed to Pay

the Financial Costs of Preferred Standards-Raising Initiatives

Action	Would you still want your local schools to take this action if you knew the school board would pay for it by: Eliminating athletics/ other extracurricular activities			Closing local schools			Increasing your taxes by $200 per year		
	% yes	% no	% no opinion	% yes	% no	% no opinion	% yes	% no	% no opinion
Have teachers spend one month each summer doing things to improve their teaching (n=305)	40.3	53.6	5.9	24.9	68.9	6.2	66.2	28.2	5.6
Limit academic classes to 25 or fewer students (n=216)	37.0	56.0	6.9	27.3	68.1	4.6	70.6	25.2	4.2
Pay outstanding teachers higher salaries than others with the same seniority (n=142)	39.4	52.1	8.5	36.6	59.2	4.2	81.7	14.8	3.5
Increase the average salary for teachers to at least $25,000 (n=139)	39.9	58.0	2.2	30.4	60.1	9.4	84.2	14.4	1.4
Assign disruptive students to alternative classrooms (n=126)	40.8	48.8	10.4	28.2	60.5	11.3	57.1	36.5	6.3
Increase the length of the school day by one hour (n=41)	29.3	58.5	12.2	22.0	63.4	14.6	75.6	17.1	7.3
Increase the length of the school year by one month (n=26)	53.8	38.5	7.7	42.3	50.0	7.7	84.6	11.5	3.8
OVERALL (n=995)	39.4	53.7	6.9	28.6	64.3	7.1	71.6	23.9	4.5
Chi-square test of differences in responses across the seven initiatives (d.f.=6)	4.93 (p =.55)			9.86 (p =.13)			34.00 (p =<.01)		
Significant sociodemographic differences in response patterns[a]	3			3, 5,6			2,3, 5,6		

Notes. n = number who prefer this action to the other six choices in this subset.

[a]1 = geographical regions; 2 = gender; 3 = age of respondent; 4 = ethnic groups; 5 = respondent's level of education; 6 = family income levels; 7 = those with and without children in public high schools

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Table 5

Public's Willingness to Endure Personal Costs Associated with Preferred Standards-Raising Initiatives

	% yes	% no	% no opinion
If your child failed the junior-high promotion exam and had to spend one extra year completing the work needed to pass, would you still want your local schools to require these tests? (n = 242)	94.6	3.7	1.7
If your child were convinced by the experience of failing the junior-high promotion exam that s/he was dumb and not able to succeed in school, would you still want your local schools to require these tests?	82.6	9.9	7.4
Would you still support action (a,b, or c below) if, under these conditions, your child had to give up athletics or other extracurricular activities to have enough time for schoolwork?			
a. Have more required courses than electives (n = 121)	65.3	30.6	4.1
b. Assign at least 1 1/2 hours of homework each day (n = 75)	72.2	20.8	6.9
c. Have almost all required courses focus on academic subjects (n = 42)	73.8	14.3	11.9
Would you still support (a or c below) if, as a result of this action, your child failed two or three required courses each year and had to take these classes again?			
a. Have more required courses than electives	80.2	14.9	5.0
b. (See second note.)			
c. Have almost all required courses focus on academic subjects	83.3	14.3	2.4
Would you still want teachers to assign 1 1/2 hours of homework each day if, under these conditions, your child had to give up a part-time job to have enough time for school work?	76.7	17.8	5.5

Note. n = number of respondents who preferred this action to the other four choices in this subset. The fourth question was not applicable for alternative b.

Proponents remained firm in their support for "preferred reforms," even in the face of adverse consequences for their own child. Less than one-third said they would abandon support for increased homework or more demanding course requirements if implementation of their preferred action meant their child would have to give up extracurricular activities or a part-time job. An even smaller proportion, fewer than 15%, said they would drop their support for more demanding course requirements or junior-high school promotion exams if, as a consequence, their child had to (a) repeat several courses, (b) repeat one full year of school, or (c) withstand a major blow to his or her self-concept. Only 10% of the 242 proponents of junior-high school promotion exams said they would abandon support for this proposal if their child were convinced by the experience of failing "that he or she was dumb and not able to succeed in school"! Patterns of responding to this set of questions did not vary across the subgroups described in Table 1.

High-School Graduation Exams

The reform proposal receiving the highest level of public support was high-school graduation exams. Contrasting both personal and social costs of these exams, the survey asked proponents if they would continue their support (1) if their own children did not pass the tests and (2) if youngsters from low-income families suffered adverse consequences. In introducing the two questions on social costs, respondents were advised that

> high school graduation exams have positive results for some students and negative results for others. However, in districts that require high-school graduation exams, white and minority youngsters from low-income families almost always suffer more negative results than youngsters from middle- or high-income families.

The analyses considered two groups who varied in their levels of commitment to graduation exams. The 574 respondents identified as "proponents" in

Table 6

Proponents' Willingness to Endure Personal and Social Costs

Associated with High-School Graduation Exams

Personal Costs:	% yes	% no	% no opinion	Significant sociodemographic differences in response patterns[a]
Do you think you would still want your local high school to require graduation exams if your child failed the tests the first time he or she took them?				
- Proponents	92.1	5.8	2.1	
Do you think you would still favor these exams if your child did not receive a regular high-school diploma because he or she was never able to pass the tests?				
- Proponents	80.4	12.5	7.2	
Social Costs:				
Would you still want your local high school to require graduation exams if nearly 50% of the low-income students fail the exams the first time they take them?				
- Proponents	76.1	19.0	4.9	2,3
- Those who favor	72.1	18.9	9.0	3
Would you still favor these exams if 20% of the low-income students do not receive regular high-school diplomas because they are never able to pass the tests?				
- Proponents	78.6	18.1	3.3	4,5,6
- Those who favor	73.1	18.1	8.7	3

Note. Proponents (n = 574) = those who preferred high-school graduation exams to the four other standards-raising proposals involving personal costs (see Table 5). Those who Favor (n = 570) = those who agreed that students in their local high schools should be required to pass graduation exams, but did not select these tests as their preferred choice among initiatives involving personal costs.

[a] 1 = geographical regions; 2 = gender; 3 = age of respondent; 4 = ethnic groups; 5 = respondent's level of education; 6 = family income levels; 7 = those with and without children in public high schools

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Table 6 named high-school graduation exams as their top choice among the five standards-raising proposals involving personal costs. A separate group of 570 individuals, called "those who favor," said their local high school should require the tests, but did not select them as their top choice among the personal cost initiatives.

Graduation exams received unusually strong support from both groups. Proponents said they were willing to have their own children bear the costs of graduation exams even if those costs included a failure to receive a regular high-school diploma. The results also indicated that some with relatively high levels of commitment to graduation exams were more concerned about social costs than personal costs. Even though 92% of the proponents said they would continue to support these tests if their own child failed them the first time he or she took them, only 76% said they would still want their local high school to require these exams if nearly 50% of the low-income students failed on their initial attempt. Levels of concern for social costs were almost as high for proponents as for individuals in the "those who favor" group.

Whereas willingness to endure the personal costs of high-school graduation exams was consistent across subgroups of proponents, some subpopulations varied in their tolerance for social costs. Proponents between 30 and 49 years old (82%) and males (83%) would be most likely to continue their support for graduation exams if 50% of the low-income students failed on their initial attempt. Proponents with family incomes above $30,000 (88%) and college graduates (90%) would be most likely to continue their support if 20% of the low-income youngsters failed to receive regular high-school diplomas. Black proponents (66%) would be least likely to continue their support under these conditions.

High-School Graduation Requirements

To gain a clearer sense of the public's perspective on efforts to reform the high-school curriculum, survey participants were asked to indicate if they were in favor of each of the high-school graduation requirements called for in the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), *A Nation at Risk*. To provide a contrast to academic requirements, survey participants were also asked to react to graduation requirements in the fine arts and in physical education. The results are shown in Table 7.

The basic academic curriculum outlined by the National Commission has struck a responsive chord among the public. Even the least popular of the Commission's recommendations--two years of foreign language for college-bound students--had majority support. However, the public does not want schools to specify the content students would be required to take (e.g., all sophomores take American history; all juniors take world history). Those who said they favored a three-year social-studies requirement were asked to imagine that their local high school had initiated this requirement. When they were then asked, "If that happens, should all students be required to take the same set of social studies courses or should they be allowed to choose some of their courses from a list of electives?" 89% said students should be given some choice.

With one exception, the results of this survey confirm the Gallup poll's rank order of subjects the public would require. The percentage of respondents in this survey who expressed support for a physical education requirement (73%) was considerably higher than the corresponding figure for participants in the Gallup poll (44%).

Subgroups varied in their responses to certain proposals, particularly the recommended English and foreign-language requirements. A four-year

Table 7

Public Perceptions of the Basic Requirements

of the High School Curriculum

In order to graduate from the high school in your local community, should all students be required to take	% yes	% no	% no opinion	Significant sociodemographic differences in response patterns[a]
three years of mathematics	90.0	8.8	1.3	
one-half year of computer science	88.4	8.8	2.8	
two years of physical education[b]	72.8	25.3	1.9	
four years of English	72.5	24.8	2.7	1,2, 5
three years of social studies	70.1	27.1	2.8	5
three years of science	69.6	27.7	2.8	
two years of art, drama, or music[b]	50.6	46.6	2.8	2, 5
Should all college-bound students be required to take at least two years of a foreign language?	59.3	37.7	3.1	1,2,3, 5, 7
If your local high school does require three years of social studies, should all students be required to take the same set of social studies courses or should they be allowed to choose some of their courses from a list of electives? (n = 841)	no choice some choice no opinion		8.6% 89.3% 2.1%	4

Note. Only those respondents who said they favor a requirement of three years of social studies were included in this analysis.

[a] 1 = geographical regions; 2 = gender; 3 = age of respondent; 4 = ethnic groups; 5 = respondent's level of education; 6 = family income levels; 7 = those with and without children in public high schools

[b] Not included in the list of recommendations cited in *A Nation at Risk*.

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requirement in English was more likely to be supported (a) by people living in the East (81%) than by those living in the Midwest (66%), (b) by females (76%) than by males (67%), and (c) by college graduates (83%) than by those who did not graduate from high school (53%). The highest levels of support for foreign language requirements came from individuals living in the West (69%), females (63%), those over 30 years of age (61%), college graduates (68%), and, private/parochial school parents (75%). The subgroups least likely to favor the foreign-language requirement were those living in the Midwest (53%), individuals less than 30 years old (54%), and parents who did not have high school-aged children (52%).

Summary Statement

The purpose of this survey was to provide a straightforward description of the public's response to proposals for raising academic standards in our nation's secondary schools and to assess their willingness to endure the costs of those reforms. We recognize that others have raised serious questions about the social consequences and probable success of some of the proposals the public favors. It is beyond both the scope and purpose of this report, however, to attempt to interpret the survey's findings within a context that gives serious attention to this literature. We will therefore limit our discussion to an analysis, and not an evaluation, of the public's response to reform proposals.

At a level of consensus normally reserved for issues of Motherhood and Apple Pie, 95% of the survey's respondents voiced their support for high-school graduation exams and junior-high school promotion tests. In fact, most survey participants found the concept of student competency testing so compelling that they said they would be willing to have their own children pay

the personal costs of this reform. It is therefore clear that the public wants tangible evidence that students are acquiring basic skills in reading and math and that students and teachers are putting forth sufficient effort to attain this goal.

In offering strong support for national teacher exams and teachers working during the summer to upgrade their teaching, the public also declared that they want tangible evidence of teacher competence and initiative. Whereas the public felt that teachers should be held accountable, they were also ready to support measures designed to attract and retain good teachers. Approximately two-thirds of the survey's participants were in favor of increasing teachers' salaries to an average of $25,000 per year and/or offering merit pay to outstanding teachers. It appears that the public is willing to pay teachers more, but they also want them to work more. In the eyes of the public, the best way to make teaching financially attractive may be to provide higher salaries for those who are willing to spend additional time each summer upgrading their knowledge and skills.

The public made three additional statements about the role of academic reform within the schools' broader context. First, survey respondents believe that when schools press for higher academic standards, they should continue to maintain their commitment to other broad educational goals (i.e., to teach vocational skills and social and personal growth). More than one-fourth of the participants in this survey ranked one of these as more important than academic development for their own children and more than one-half said they would abandon support for a preferred proposal if the cost were elimination of extracurricular activities. Only 42% favored limiting the focus of required courses to academics.

Second, the public wants to maintain the current school calendar. There were only three standards-raising proposals that did not enjoy majority support. Of these, two focused on changes in the time allocations--lengthening the school day by one hour and lengthening the school year by one month. Third, a significant segment of the public also declared that, in pressing for higher standards, schools must not reverse their long-standing commitment to an egalitarian ideal. Some of the strongest advocates of high-school graduation exams were reluctant to have low-income students pay the costs of that reform. There was almost no support for excluding disruptive students from schools, and there was very strong support for efforts to minimize unexcused absences.

Collectively, these results portray a generalized idea that the public has of its secondary schools, that is, schools that are open to, and trying to accommodate, all students; that allocate resources to vocational, personal, and social, as well as academic ends; that operate within a time frame of six or seven hours a day, 180 days a year; and that segment the curriculum into various subjects and pursuits depending on the client or clientele. The answer to the larger question posed by this survey, "Will the public support reforms that threaten this generalized idea?" is "no." The public will support and pay for efforts to improve academic standards to the extent that those efforts do not close off opportunities to any students; reduce attention to the social, personal, and vocational ends of schooling; increase traditional time commitments; or radically alter the elective curriculum.

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